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Introduction

Origin and Development of the
American Indian Boarding School System

Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc

Among North American Indians, the boarding school system was a successful failure. The practice of removing Native American children from their homes, families, and communities and forcing them into an educational system designed to assimilate them into American and Canadian societies both succeeded and failed. The governments succeeded in providing some measure of academic, domestic, agricultural, and vocational education to First Nations children, but they failed to assimilate completely Indian children or entirely destroy the essence of their being Native peoples. Ironically, the American boarding school and Canadian residential school experience for many Native American children provided new skills in language, literature, mathematics, and history that strengthened their identities as Native Americans. Many children attending boarding schools returned home or moved to urban areas where they embraced their American Indian heritage in a heightened manner, communicating their strength in being the First Americans in ways that preserved Indian identity. Thus the very system that non-Indians had established to “Kill the Indian in him and save the man”¹ provided Indian students with the experience and expertise to “turn the power.”² Students used the potentially negative experience to produce a positive result—the preservation of Indian identity, cultures, communities, languages, and peoples. For many Native Americans, the initial exposure to boarding schools gave them the blues, and the illness and death of so many children left their mark on the hearts and minds of Indian people from the outset. Still, the American Indian boarding school experience also

resulted in many students living dynamic lives that forever changed American history and Native American cultures.

In the first years of the twenty-first century, interpreting the American Indian boarding school experience is both difficult and dangerous. It is difficult because of the diverse views Indian people have about the schools and the various elements of their school experiences. The experience of one boarding school student is different from the experience of other students. As we learn more, we sometimes generalize with “some students believed” or “most students acted” in certain ways. We try to be precise in our examples and provide our best historical analysis. Interpreting the boarding school experience can be dangerous because we are representing several students, their lives, a different time, and a variety of diverse experiences. We provide our best analysis based on written and oral documents as well as our personal experiences visiting and working at Indian boarding schools. We offer our stories based on a close reading of the sources and our examination of historical sites, material culture, and the experiences of former students. We feel that the most insightful stories of the American Indian boarding school experience lie with former students who are heroes to us. They lived the stories we are trying to present, represent, and understand.

The motifs of traditional Native American stories about heroes and monsters are woven into stories about the modern boarding school experience. Some students set out to engage the adventure by willingly attending boarding school, or embracing the “monster.” Lakota student Ota Kte (Plenty Kill), better known as Luther Standing Bear, decided to go to Carlisle Indian School in 1879 to fulfill a warrior’s journey. “I was thinking of my father,” Luther wrote years later, and the number of times his father had told him that men earned greater honor by dying young for the people than by dying “old and sick.” As a result, “it occurred to me that this chance to go East would prove that I was brave.”³ Standing Bear believed that if he died at Carlisle, his passing would have meaning and benefit to Lakota people and bring honor to himself, his family, and his people. Many more Indian children were thrust into the boarding school experience without their consent and had to engage the “monster.”

Regardless of how they came to be a part of the boarding school system, students had to cope with new places, new people, and policies designed to

destroy their cultural identities. Originally, the United States created boarding schools as a sphere of governmental power, not of Native power. Non-Indian policy makers and administrators designed the institutions to swallow up American Indian people and transform them into “civilized” human beings. As Richard Henry Pratt, the creator of the modern American Indian boarding school system, put it, white Americans should feed “the Indians to our civilization.”⁴ Students fought the monster, struggled with it, and many survived the experience. Indian children who lived through their boarding school days were transformed. Many learned to speak, read, and write English, and they shared this and other knowledge with people back home. Students learned new subjects and trades, further developing themselves in new ways. But most Indians did not turn their back on First Nations people or discard their cultural identities as Indians.

Like the heroes of the most ancient American stories, students survived their confrontation with the monster. Through their engagement with the monster they killed the concept of assimilation, which eventually gave way to cultural preservation through the use of some skills learned at boarding schools. American Indian students who fought the monster often emerged stronger, wiser, and better prepared to help their own people. In a very real sense, they turned the power to their advantage and that of their people. They became stronger. In an old Maidu Indian story from California, a young man had grown stronger and stronger as a result of venturing forth from his home. The farther he traveled and the more he accomplished, the stronger he became. When Lizard Monster sought out the young man for a fight, the boy destroyed the ogre and returned to his family to serve his people in a loftier manner. He became Thunder Man, the one still heard above the mountains, valleys, and foothills of northern California.⁵

We still hear the echoes of children who attended boarding schools. We are still learning from these voices and those of contemporary Indian children who attend off-reservation boarding schools. More and more, we are learning about their boarding school days through public programs, films, and publications. The students and their voices are, for us, more than survivors. They are like the old-time heroes who returned to Indian country to benefit other Indian people. They held onto their Native American identities in the face of an attempted cultural genocide, and they used lessons learned

at the boarding schools to contribute to the well-being of their families, communities, and tribes. The manner in which students put their boarding school education to work for themselves and their people is best seen in the writings of former students. During the twentieth century, American Indians used the English language to compose books and essays conveying their own analysis of the boarding school experience. Until recently we had not known a great deal about the American Indian boarding school experience in Canada or the United States. Autobiographical accounts by Luther Standing Bear, Don Talayesva, Polingaysi Qoyawayma, Pauline Murillo, Frank Mitchell, Charles Eastman, Francis La Flesche, Minnie Braithwaite Jenkins, Hubert Honanie, Basil Johnston, Viola Martinez, Helen Sekaquaptewa, Jim Whitewolf, and others allow us into their world and provide views on the boarding school experience.⁶ Recent scholarship has added a great deal to our knowledge and understanding of the boarding school experience. Michael C. Coleman, for example, has brought together a number of first-person accounts in *American Indian Children at School, 1850–1930*.⁷

The boarding school system had its origins in the colonial period of American history.⁸ The Spanish created the first Indian boarding school in Havana, Cuba, in 1568. Like people of other European nations, Spanish officials viewed Indians as “savages.” Based on “facts” provided by Father Pedro de Cordoba, one Spanish soldier reported that Indian people were “stupid and silly” and had “no respect for truth.” He stereotyped Indians, saying, “They have no knowledge of what foresight means” and were “incapable of learning.” This Spanish soldier remarked that Indians “exercise none of the humane arts or industries.” Finally, he stated categorically that Indians were “more stupid than asses” and that they “refuse to improve in anything.”⁹ This view of European superiority and Native American inferiority set the stage for the first Spanish boarding school for Indians and others that would follow. Europeans assumed incorrectly that Indians had no systems of education, no forms of governments, no religions, no valuing of wisdom, no methods of advancing knowledge, and no way to teach their children. In her brilliant essay “Systems of Knowledge,” Clare Sue Kidwell details that American Indians educated their young people in a variety of ways and that they had been doing so for thousands of years prior to the European invasion of America.¹⁰ Tsianina Lomawaima addresses this issue in “The Un-Natural History of American Indian Education,” found in a pro-

vocative book by Karen Swisher and John Tippeconic, *Next Steps*. These Native American authors demonstrate that Indian people had their own forms of education long before Europeans arrived.¹¹

Traditional Native Education

Indian people argue that education, schooling, and the pursuit of knowledge have always been part of their lives and cultures. Tribal elders, grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, singers, and storytellers imparted knowledge through the oral tradition and practical instruction. Elder teachers taught children about a host of subjects, including literature, religion, biology, botany, pharmaceuticals, geology, geography, cartography, dance, art, architecture, astronomy, agriculture, music, material culture, mathematics, marine biology, and hydrology.¹² Indian people throughout the Native universe listened to and learned from others. They learned the languages of their neighbors, pottery techniques, agricultural advancements, artistic designs, watercraft manufacturing, and technological advances. Indian people absorbed knowledge, just as peoples around the world had incorporated new learning into their lives since the beginning of time. Native Americans had never existed in an archaic time warp. Time and travel, interaction with other people, and a willingness to learn encouraged First Nations peoples to grow, adapt, adopt, and expand their ways of knowing. American Indians shared ideas with each other and with those outside their families, clans, and tribes. Knowledge was never static, since most people enjoyed a pragmatic approach to their world. Their knowledge, experiences, and educations worked for them, and for hundreds of years Indian people lived and survived without the intervention of non-Indian newcomers. Yet, when they met the new people, Native Americans learned from African, Spanish, French, Portuguese, English, Russian, and others—sometimes to their betterment, sometimes to their detriment.¹³

In order to survive, each group of First Nations people developed a body of sacred and practical knowledge that formed the foundation of its culture. In oral traditions, children learned about creation of their people, the laws by which they would live, and the governance of families, clans, moieties, and tribes. They learned the essentials of being sovereign people. Most often, families and clans provided the first teachers of Native children. Fathers, grandfathers, and uncles taught boys to track, hunt, and clean deer,

elk, bighorn sheep, buffalo, antelope, rabbits, squirrels, and many other animals. Mothers, grandmothers, and aunts taught girls to till the soil and raise a host of nutritious and unique American foods, including varieties of potatoes, beans, squash, tomatoes, corn, avocados, and peanuts. Elders taught children to gather medicinal and food plants, including tobacco, acorns, creosote, camas, kouse, cactus, sage, and maple syrup. Adults taught young people how to prepare plants and animals for food and medicine, how to build appropriate houses from natural materials, and how to pray, sing, and dance. They taught children the mysteries of the stars and the solar system, creating calendars and special days and times for ceremony, ritual, and thanksgiving. For thousands of years, American Indian people taught a variety of subjects significant to their specific needs and wishes.¹⁴

In 1980, Palouse Indian elder and spiritual leader Andrew George from Washington state explained that in his youth during the early twentieth century his parents and grandparents gathered the children together to learn. In the cold winter months when winds blew snow and freezing weather, the children gathered their blankets around a fire and prepared to listen and learn. Andrew remembered the elders giving their lessons until at some point, after repeating the story many times, the elder asked a particular child to repeat that story. Teachers expected students to retell the story exactly, and if a child got the story wrong, elders corrected the story and had the child try again. Through the oral tradition, children learned their lessons. In this manner, Wyandot elder Eleonore Sioui learned her lessons, as did millions of American Indian children over many generations, gaining knowledge and practical experiences that informed their lives and people. Native American education occurred on many levels and in many ways, including some formal “schools” located in villages and urban centers. But most Indians learned through the oral traditions in their own homes and communities until the arrival of non-Native educational institutions that rapidly and widely influenced Indian education.¹⁵

Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

After 1492, the educational institutions brought to the Americas by newcomers, including the boarding school system, significantly changed Native American education. Until the mid-nineteenth century these institutions only influenced small pockets of North America. Most Europeans brought

I. Beyond Bleakness

The Brighter Side of Indian Boarding Schools, 1870–1940

David Wallace Adams

David Wallace Adams is a distinguished professor of education at Cleveland State University, where he teaches the history of American Indian education. Although Adams has published widely, he is best known for his pathbreaking book *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*. He states in this essay that federal policy makers intended boarding schools to assimilate American Indian children by removing them from their homes, cultures, and languages. School officials sought to destroy Native American identity and to replace it with new values that reflected the dominant society. Adams understands that in spite of the fact that Indian students suffered loneliness, harsh punishments, isolation, dangerous diseases, and a continual assault on their traditional cultures, many students found ways to cope with and to enjoy their boarding school days. Native parents and tribal elders often implored their children to work hard and learn as much as they could so that the students could better serve their communities. Many students felt obligated to make the best of their schooling, while others openly embraced their educational experience.

Many students enjoyed making money through the “outing” (work) programs, and they sent money home and bought things they had long wanted. Students enjoyed learning a number of trades, including harness making, carpentry, masonry, and sewing. They often enjoyed participating in the school band, choir, or drama clubs. Some students traveled to other communities, including big cities, to share their talents. They had an opportunity to see new and exciting places. Athletes at the Indian schools also enjoyed traveling to new places and felt privileged to have the opportunity of representing their schools in football, baseball, and track. Indian students sometimes fell in love at the boarding schools, and many children came home with rich stories that families still share.

The picture that historians have painted of Indian boarding schools has generally been a bleak one. The scenario goes something like this. Late-nineteenth-century policy makers, convinced that the alternatives facing Indi-

ans were racial extinction or forced assimilation, were determined to effect the latter. The mechanism for accomplishing this objective was education. On- and (especially) off-reservation boarding schools were deemed the ideal instruments for lifting Indian children out of the depths of “savagism” and setting them on the path to progress, that is, “civilization.” Boarding schools would carry out this process by removing Indian children from their native environment, stripping away all outward vestiges of traditional identity, and then exposing them to an instructional program equally divided between academic and industrial training, supplemented by routinized chore work. All this took place in a military-like institutional setting characterized by drill and marching, constant monitoring, and harsh discipline, where the very acts of eating, sleeping, and hygiene were regulated by bugles and bells driven by the precise measurements of the white man’s clock. Conceived as assimilationist hothouses, boarding schools were designed to individualize, republicanize, and Christianize the next generation of Indian youth, qualifying them as fit candidates for American citizenship. Students, meanwhile, endured heartbreaking loneliness, substandard diets, humiliating punishments, life-threatening diseases, and an unrelenting assault on their cultural and psychological selves.¹ Not an uplifting story.

But there is another, less dismal, side of the boarding school story, and it is this other side that is the focus of this essay. This essay asks: In what ways and for what reasons did Indian youth sometimes come to look upon their years at boarding school as a rewarding and even joyful experience? Before addressing this question, a few disclaimers are in order. First, the following discussion is not a revisionist attempt to argue that boarding schools were a necessary or desirable development in the evolution of federal Indian policy or that most Indian youth looked upon their school years as an overall pleasant or positive experience. Nor does this essay claim that past treatments of Indian schooling have dwelled exclusively upon the negative features of the boarding school story. In fact, most scholars who have studied the subject, however critical in their perspective, acknowledge that Indian communities and students alike saw redeeming value in the boarding school experience.² This essay, rather, attempts to pull together the various strands of this somewhat muted theme and to make sense of it as an important element in the boarding school story. Third, it is important to remember that the Indian student’s response to boarding school was not an

either/or matter. Over the course of several years, a single year, or even a single day, a given student might experience a range of emotions and respond in a range of ways, running the gamut from active accommodation, to bewilderment, to ambivalence, to overt resistance.³ Finally, this study is offered with the frank admission that scholars are on very shaky ground when they attempt to make hard generalizations on the question of student responses. This is partly so because efforts to examine the subject are frequently and necessarily based on material collected long after the experience itself. While memoirs and oral historical accounts are invaluable, it is nonetheless true that *experiencing* an event is often quite different from *having experienced* it. As Sally McBeth has pointed out, because the boarding school experience is such an important element of what it has meant to be Indian in America—that is, Indian identity—it is imbued with shifting symbolic meanings that are often paradoxical and contradictory. Meanwhile, given the paucity of sources for uncovering the attitudes, feelings, and actions of Indian children at the time of their attendance, historians are forced to rely on these accounts recorded years later. This essay does not resolve this dilemma; it merely acknowledges it.⁴

It is important to remember that although Indian agents often resorted to force to fill school enrollment quotas, some Indian children came to boarding school willingly. Consider the behavior of an adolescent Hopi girl in 1906 when she spotted a covered wagon full of Hopis coming down the road from Second Mesa. Polingaysi Qoyawayma had heard rumors that a group of children from Keams Canyon Boarding School were to be taken to Sherman Institute, the distant school in southern California, and she thought the approaching wagon must surely be this group. When the wagon stopped at the trading post to camp for the night, her suspicion was confirmed by one of wagon's occupants, who announced: "We're going to the land of oranges faraway in California." Polingaysi, who had already defied her parents by attending the day school at Oraibi, was determined to do so again if it meant going to the school in the "land of oranges." Unable to convince her parents to sign the required permission form, the next morning she crept into the wagon in the predawn hours hoping the driver wouldn't spot her. But the plan went awry and she was ordered out of the wagon. The stubborn Hopi girl refused to budge, however, pronouncing: "I will not get out of the wagon. I am going along." Finally, it was decided to fetch the girl's

parents, who would either force their daughter from the wagon or give in to her burning desire. In the end her father relented, saying: “I think we should allow her to go. . . . She will be well taken care of. She will learn more of the writing marks that are in books. I think we should sign the paper.” And so they did, a gesture for which Polingaysi would be ever grateful.⁵

The fact that Qoyawayma eagerly wanted to go off to boarding school surely accounts for something in explaining her overall favorable attitude toward the whole experience. Also, it should not be forgotten that many students went off to school with strong support from tribal elders, an endorsement of the white man’s school that presumably carried considerable weight with children embarking upon this new adventure. As the father of Francis La Flesche explained to his son:

Early I sought the society of those who knew the teaching of the chiefs. From them I learned that kindness and hospitality win the love of a people. I culled from their teachings their noblest thoughts, and treasured them, and they have been my guide. You came into existence, and have reached the age when you should seek for knowledge. That you might profit by the teachings of your own people and that of the white race, and that you might avoid the misery which accompanies ignorance, I placed you in the House of the Teaching of the White-Chests, who are said to be wise and to have in their books the utterances of great and learned men. I had treasured the hope that you would seek to know the good deeds done by men of your own race, and by men of the white race, that you would follow their example and take pleasure in doing the things that are noble and helpful to those around you. Am I to be disappointed?

Likewise, Thomas Wildcat Alford relates that before he and another Shawnee boy, both designated as future chiefs, were sent off to Hampton Institute, tribal chiefs “told us of their desire that we should learn the white man’s wisdom. How to read in books, how to understand all that was written and spoken to about our people and the government.”⁶

But even in those instances where children were forced into school, they too, over the span of month and years, might come to appreciate aspects of their experience. In the end there were at least six reasons why students might find the boarding school experience satisfying—or at least partially so. First, some found boarding school a welcome escape from the desper-

ate economic and social conditions in their home communities. Here we confront one of the most unpleasant realities of turn-of-the-century reservation life: in the struggle for existence, many families were only surviving by the skin of their teeth. For Frank Mitchell, a Navajo who attended the reservation boarding school at Fort Defiance, the motivation to attend the white man's school derived largely from economic factors. As he recalls in his autobiography: "The school accepted just any children, regardless of what conditions they were in. Some of those children were brought to school very badly clothed; there was just nothing clean or whole on them." He continues:

When I entered school there was plenty to eat there, more food than I used to get at home. We had different foods at Fort Defiance, like rice and beans. And we had some dried fruit that we ate, like apples. Besides that we had meat, beef, which was bought for us at school. So I was happy about that; I was willing to go to school if they were going to feed me like that. The clothing that I got there too gave me joy. I was proud to look at the clothes and the shoes, and to walk around in them.

In spite of these material benefits, Mitchell dropped out for three years after spending one year at Fort Defiance, largely because of his mother's opposition to white education. But by then all of his school clothes were worn to a frazzle. "So I was running around with white calico pants again," he relates, "and even my shoes were worn out. When I realized what condition I was in again, I got to thinking about going back to school." And so he did.⁷

Sometimes the motivation to escape reservation communities sprang more social conditions. In communities ravaged by alcoholism, where the unraveling of village and kinship ties forced children into chaotic and violent environments, boarding schools held out a measure of physical and psychological security. The extent of this appeal is revealed in the comments of seventh-grade Haskell students in essays written on the topic "Alcohol and My Future." One student wrote: "Why is it that I am against the liquor traffic? Because whisky caused my father's death. He was an officer and the drunkards were all against him and killed him." Another wrote: "We once had a nice home but after alcohol entered it kept on going down and down until we had no home. Papa drank up everything. He caused mother to sell

her land and now mother has no home at all. She works. If I had the power, I would crush every saloon to pieces.” More than one student confessed to having succumbed to self-destructing drinking.

I am sorry to say that I don't know when I took my first drink, maybe it was before I could walk, as my father and mother were both drunkards, although my mother punished me when I took some without her permission. . . . Today I am living without parents. This liquor is the cause of that and they [Indians] try hard to get us in this trap. My father was found under the snow by a farmer who happened to drive to town after the snow storm. What was the cause of this? Alcohol. Alcohol is the cause of nearly all crime. Let us brace up and fight against our common enemy who is killing out parents.⁸

In such troubled environments it is understandable that some Indian youth looked upon boarding school as a welcome relief, a safe space from the oftentimes depressing and destructive conditions of reservation life.

Sometimes it was parents who turned to boarding schools because personal and economic circumstances made it impossible for them to care for their children. One Kiowa woman recalled: “I wanted to go home and be with mama, but she said, ‘Well, if you come home, we’ll only be eating one meal a day, and so I think you should go.’” In *Boarding School Seasons*, Brenda Child cites several instances of parents requesting that superintendents enroll their children in boarding school. In 1924 a recently widowed Ojibwa father wrote the school at Flandreau, South Dakota: “I have lost my wife and left me with six children. . . . I would like to ask you to send these little folks over to you two or three years so I can get along. It is hard for me [to] stay here alone home because children not used home alone when mother gone. When I am going working out it hard for them . . . and this all I ask you if you have a place for them.” That same year, another widowed father made this appeal: “I am writing you to see if you can do me a favor by taking my daughter in your school it would be a big favor to me as my wife died Feb. 4th and have no way to taking care of the girl we cant stay at home as it is very lonesome for her. . . . Therefore I am asking you this favor, to turn my daughter over in your care.”⁹

The flip side of those economic factors *pushing* students into school were the same factors *pulling* them in its direction. This second motivation for at-